



“Lord, to Whom Can We Go?”

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John 6:56-69

A restaurant opened up last year near 75 and Spring Valley that reminds my family of our time in Georgia. It's an Atlanta based chain called The Flying Biscuit. When we lived in Atlanta, my family would go there for brunch on my day off every week. We eventually became like Norm from Cheers and everyone knew us when we would walk in. Our table would be set and ready, prepped with children's menus and large cups of coffee. In fact, our young server whom we saw every week eventually became the babysitter for our girls. So, you can imagine our glee when we noticed that one had opened just minutes from our house. We are Flying Biscuit experts and seemed to know way more about the menu than the rookie workers at this brand-new location.

A couple of Sundays ago we went to The Flying Biscuit for lunch. Now, the biscuits don't actually fly, but they do fly into the mouths of eager eaters. Among those eager eaters are my girls. They love breakfast foods, even for lunch - biscuits, and bacon, and eggs sunny-side up. C'mon y'all, who couldn't eat breakfast for every meal? As long as Amanda and I have coffee, we are good with whatever comes to the table. Well, my girls especially love The Flying Biscuit because their children's menus are fun placemats. And on those placemats have games on them like search-a-word in which you have to find words like biscuit, sausage, and coffee. Among the other games on the placemat was a maze. Listen, I have a doctorate, folks, and I can do hard things, but I just couldn't seem to get Beatrice through that darn maze. She was using a blue crayon and that smudgy line was traced back and forth all over the page. It was messy and confusing and we couldn't seem to find out way out. There were dead ends and turnarounds and no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't find the pathway ahead. As a neat freak and a perfectionist, I was disappointed that this game wasn't orderly. That placemat was a blue wreck by the time Bea's crayon broke and we agreed to throw in the towel. I don't know about you, but I often get frustrated that life is messy and that it doesn't follow an easy path.

Well, in this sixth chapter of John, the path for the disciples had seemed easy and straight forward. We have been in a season where bread has been the theme. For weeks we have seen Jesus feed the five thousand with several loaves of bread. Then Jesus compared this bread to the raining of bread in the wilderness when manna fed the people who wandered for forty years as if they were in a maze. Jesus then said he was the Bread of Life and that we can be living bread people who nourish the world. And last week, we saw Jesus cook a breakfast of fish and bread for his doubting disciples when they needed encouragement and hope. The disciples knew they were following the one who would guide them through the wilderness of Roman oppression and the maze of unjust religious laws. They were receiving blessing after blessing, healing after healing, and teaching after teaching, until they would finally reach the promised land with Jesus. Everything fit just right and was in good order. Until. Until Jesus started to meddle with their preconceived ideas of what it meant to follow the Bread of Life. Jesus began another part of his John 6 monologue in a nice fashion referring to himself as the living bread... only to lead us to a

dead-end in the maze by commanding the disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. Uh oh. Suddenly the disciples were backtracking and tracing over their strokes made with crayons. Things had turned messy and scary and things were no longer neat and orderly. Jesus was now drawing outside the lines.

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’” I wonder if Jesus then realized that he had pushed the disciples just a little too far. Have you ever said anything you wish you could take back? Like it came out of your mouth and it was in that split second you wish you hadn’t said it? I bet that’s what Jesus was feeling when he said “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me...” “Oops. That sounds awful and I don’t think the crowd, heck, I don’t think my disciples will understand this image.” I wonder if Jesus knew that he was leading the disciples through a maze that was impossible to traverse. How could they possibly follow Jesus on this new path?

This idea that they had to actually eat Jesus’s flesh and drink his blood was disgusting. Obviously, the cannibalistic references didn’t help, but I think they also didn’t like the way he was messing with the old stories, scribbling outside the lines, making the sensible puzzle of life they’d imagined into a much more complicated maze. Even if Jesus meant it as a powerful image of flesh as contact and relationship and blood as life-giving power, these ideas didn’t make up for the fact that in this metaphor Jesus would have to die in some way so that we could consume him and be consumed by him. Jesus was again pushing the boundaries with his words and coloring outside the lines.

But this is what Jesus does. He frustrates the crowds with his words and his proclamations. Remember two weeks ago we saw that those around him “grumbled because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’” We’ve heard this confusion and the griping and grumbling from those following Jesus for several weeks now. We see the mounting displeasure the disciples and his followers have with Jesus, with the very one who had so recently filled them and satisfied their hunger in the deserted place. But Jesus, as Jesus often did, pushed them even further into the maze of bread imagery. He then said that his flesh must be eaten and his blood must be drunk so that they could know true communion and fellowship with the kin-dom of God. And by the time we, as hearers of this story, get to this part of the text we heard this morning in the Gospel lesson, Jesus’s followers were floundering in the maze of confusion. They were saying, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

And it appears that Jesus isn’t done. He presses in even harder and more intensely: “Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. . . I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.” And the followers, just like Beatrice in *The Flying Biscuit*, broke their crayons and were done with the game! “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” Jesus had said really hard words, words that were impossible to understand, words that were gross, words that were confusing, words that hurt... and the disciples responded. They walked away.

Then Jesus turned to the twelve, his “chosen ones,” the ones who were with him from the very beginning, the ones who left everything behind to follow this Bread of Life. And Jesus asked them whether they, too, wanted to leave him. After all, if the religious officials, the Roman leaders, the bedraggled crowds, and even the other disciples were finding him to be fraud and a deceiver, to be fake bread, surely the twelve were done with him too. And what did the twelve do since they knew him better than any of those who had left him? What did they think of Jesus now? Well, Peter answered for them. Peter spoke from the depths of his heart just like he did when he called Jesus “the Christ, Son of the Living God.” He said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Simon Peter, the leader of the twelve, probably had no idea what Jesus meant when he asked them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. I’m sure the twelve didn’t understand his sayings any better than those who had just left. In fact, time after time the twelve frequently questioned Jesus about what Jesus meant when he spoke in parables and used images to talk about God. They didn’t respond as they did, remaining with Jesus, because they understood the words better than those abandoning Jesus. They simply knew the second part of Peter’s response was true. Peter and the rest of the twelve knew what those fleeing did not, that Jesus had “the words of eternal life.” There was nowhere else to go where these followers could find life, could find the strength to change the world. Jesus was their sustenance and he would be the ultimate example to them of a servant’s power, of bringing peace to a violent world.

But Jesus had to first remind them of their history. He was calling them back to their old stories of when God gave them manna in the wilderness and provided for them even when they felt lonely, confused, or abandoned. In the original manna story, the people’s response to God’s salvation was scattered. Although they initially praised God for setting them free, Israel immediately began to “grumble” or “complain” against God and Moses in the wilderness. Their trust began to fade and they no longer believed that God would take care of them. They were no longer consumed by the presence of God because it had been a long time since they had consumed water, food, and received physical safety. The wandering Israelites no longer went to their God to find the words of eternal life.

If the disciples that ran away had really taken the manna story to heart, they’d have remembered what a meandering story the Exodus was. One commentator noticed, “If those long-ago Israelites had walked in a straight line to the holy land it might’ve taken them a few weeks. But they struggled with each other, fought with their leaders, didn’t like God anymore, couldn’t agree on anything. And they wandered in a very messy way for a generation.” And just like the close disciples of Jesus, who at their best understood that life does not travel in straight lines, we too know that life throws us curves, twists, and turns. No matter how hard we try to make things straighten out, no matter how hard we try to follow a clear path and not retrace our steps, life will always be messy. Cancer. ALS. A broken relationship. A sick spouse. A parent’s death. Too many bills. Expensive health insurance. A bad accident. Losing a job. A friend is arrested. Bigotry and hatred. Bad news, bad memories, and bad days. Our lives are not straight lines. Our lives feel like a maze. Where do we go when we need the words of eternal life? Where do we go when we need comfort?

In the Preface to her book *Amazing Grace*, subtitled “A Vocabulary of Faith,” Kathleen Norris tells of an evening when she was making a presentation on the “vocabulary of faith.” A question was addressed to her concerning the real value of “words of faith.” “I don’t mean to be offensive,” her questioner said, “but I just don’t understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm.” Taken aback momentarily (Ms. Norris understood the question all too well, for she had, herself, been distanced from faith and its vocabulary for many years), she struggled to respond when in a moment of inspiration, it came to her that the problem lay in the word “comfort.” “I said that I didn’t think it was comfort I was seeking,” Ms. Norris said, “or comfort that I’d found. Look, I said to her, as a rush of words came to me. As far as I’m concerned, this religion has saved my life, my husband’s life, and our marriage. So, it’s not comfort that I’m talking about but salvation.”

So, where do we turn when we need saving? Where do we go when our blue crayons break and we are lost in the twists and turns of life? “Lord, to whom can we go?” In those hard times the words of Jesus sometimes seem to offer little by way of comfort or direction or consolation. Where do we go when we are tempted to “turn back and no longer follow him?” When we are no longer filled with life-giving words and our stomachs and spirits growl in longing and pain, to whom can we find the words of eternal life?

We find life when we remain with Jesus, when we stick so close to Jesus that it feels like we are being consumed by his presence and we are sharing in this Word become flesh. But, church, the words of eternal life are not easy to hear. They aren’t pithy slogans, or website statements, or on the welcome mat of our homes. They are not simple, cute, or calm words. The words of eternal life are complicated and confusing. They remind us that life is not always easy; solutions to our problems are not straightforward. The words of life call us to trust Jesus and to do that hard thing of following so close to our Savior that we begin to transform into bread people, grafting our skin against skin, so that we can be the ones who bring life to world. We must consume Jesus, consume his compassion, consume his passion, consume his zeal, consume his love, consume his righteous anger, consume his soft spirit, consume his life-giving, love-spreading body and blood so that we can be the hands and feet of Christ to the world.

Writing in the midst of a controversy about the nature of the sacraments, Martin Luther said very much the same. “Although [God] is present in all creatures,” Luther writes, “and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet he does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and [thereby] cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope, rather, where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way.” Grope where the Word is. What a vivid way to emphasize the importance of not only the Lord’s Supper where we consume bread and cup as we remember the sacrifice of Jesus, but we grope in the darkness, in the messiness of life, for salvation, for life. And that means the world is groping and looking for us to nourish them, heal them, sustain them, and save them. We need to be the flesh and blood of Christ in the world.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We must remain with the Word. We cannot return to the slavery of the empire. We must trust God and we must be consumed by Jesus. Because when we are winding our way around our lives, retracing

our steps, losing our way, stumbling around outside the lines, we are often lost and alone. But if we remain in Jesus, we realize that there is nowhere else we can go that can give us the strength, the wisdom, and the hope to carry on. There is something about the Word, about Jesus, that we cannot seem to find anywhere else. And in a world that needs the words of life, in a world that is crooked, and crazy, and feels like a maze most days, we must bring life. And so, when the world asks us this week, “To whom can we go?” We must answer, “To the Living Bread.” Come to the table of fellowship and salvation. Come and partake in the words of eternal life.

Amen.